

# Dealing with Deployment

## *Spouses help teachers understand life at home*

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What began as a chat over coffee became a learning opportunity for teachers in the Heidelberg community.

Seven women, all who have, or have had husbands deployed or frequently away on temporary duty, shared their experience with a room full of teachers and support staff at

Patrick Henry Elementary School Friday, a teacher in-service day.

The topic was one that touches most everyone in the community – deployments and the effect they have on military children.

Between 15-20 percent of students in Heidelberg have a deployed parent at any one time, according to Jim Ruehmeling, Heidelberg schools liaison officer.

The panel idea came up during Coffee Friday time, when the school invites parents to come have coffee and talk – no agenda, just to chat, said Dr. Russ Claus, PHES principal.

Many of these parents have moving stories, and I wanted all our teachers to hear them, he said, quoting author and motivational speaker Stephen Covey, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

“I watched the faces of the audience, and they got it,” Claus said.

The women gave the teachers a “clearer view into their worlds,” he said, and helped them better understand what the children are experiencing.

### **A deployed Army**

Jane Shumway, one of the parents, related a telling story to the audience.

Her husband had been deployed to Iraq for about four months, and her daughter told her she better learn how to type.

She asked her daughter why such a skill was necessary, and her daughter pointedly told her, “if dad dies, you have to get a job.”

It was the first time she understood how fully her daughter was dealing with the deployment.

Mothers of younger children described their children regressing. One mother said her 3 year old started wetting himself again, months after successfully potty training.

Another mother, Jade Rangel, said her daughter stopped talking and would only point to what she wanted. When her husband came home on rest and relaxation leave, her daughter was once again a chatterbox showing dad all the toys and drawings she had.

Rangel said her daughter confided, "My daddy left me," early in the deployment.

Her daughter suffered separation anxiety, fearing that her father had left her and her mom might, too. The anxiety lasted well after the deployment and involved more than just her immediate family.

Her daughter's teacher was out one day for some personal appointments, and her daughter was clearly upset, saying that her teacher left her, too. "A year later, and she's still scared that someone is going to leave her," Rangel said.

Several mothers talked about ways in which their children acted out, kicking, screaming and in some cases biting.

Other children retreated. Madeline Lanza talked about how her son is very outgoing, willing to talk to anyone, but when her husband was deployed, her son gradually pulled into himself. When asked why, he replied, "Daddy's not here, so I don't have to talk."

Today, when her husband is on temporary duty, her son becomes more belligerent, she said. She recalled a time when she accompanied her husband on a business trip, and she was told her son became very aggressive and was easily turned to tears.

### **Parental Descent**

One mother confessed that although she tried to maintain a stoic appearance, "I lost it."

Katherine Hite said that her experience was a lot of firsts for her, her first assignment, her first time overseas and her first deployment.

She was able to handle it in public, she said, but not at home. "I hit depression hard ... I would go to the commissary to have adult conversation," she said.

Claus said that was one comment where he could see the emotions on his teachers' faces.

Hite said the things that brought her up out of the depression were when her daughter's teacher would show her what her daughter was doing in class.

"It made my day," Hite said.

Many teachers in the room made a mental note when Hite made the comment, Claus said.

Hite said she went to counseling and began talking to other parents and has learned to cope in a deployed marriage. “Once I got myself straight,” Hite said, “(my children) took their cues from me.”

Many mothers talked about the ways they help their children cope with the deployment.

Many of the coping strategies involved keeping everyone busy and in a routine.

“Where dad would be there, I had to fill the void with something,” Rangel said.

“I got my son involved in everything I could,” Lanza said. “Mothers in this community are running trying to keep up with their children.”

### **Helping Hands**

The panel discussed many ways teachers can help them and their children.

“Hook parents up with other parents,” Hite said. She had a hard time finding a deployment support group, but the teachers know other parents and programs.

She also said it was important for teachers to communicate to the parents what their children are doing in school, often so they can relay that information to their deployed spouses.

One of the moderators, Sally March, a Military and Family Life consultant, said she has never met a bad child, just children who are in pain and who are scared. Teachers should take that into consideration when a child acts out. “It doesn’t mean the rules or discipline changes,” she said.

“I look for opportunities to talk to my children one on one,” Shumway said. They open up at those times. “Remember, when a child has a tantrum, it is not time to have your own.”

The parents advocated for two-way communication, asking that teachers ask how the children are behaving at home.

They also told other parents to keep in mind that the teachers follow multiple children and will need to be prompted from time to time for information about their children.

A teacher told the group that parents can make calls to classrooms using the Defense Switched Network.

Hite warned teachers to be prepared for a melt down when dad or mom says “bye.”

Another teacher suggested that parents tell teachers if their child is having a hard time with academic support at home. Parents may need to spend some special time with their child during deployments, and academics might be secondary.

## **Forging Communications**

Claus said now that the panel exists, and more than 30 teachers attended, they can tell other teachers and the parents can tell other parents, and hopefully a dialogue will develop.

Teachers already network within the school and discuss how they can support the children better, Clause said. The panel's input will influence those discussions.

The panel helped him go through his list of ideas for helping deployed children, and helped him decide what to continue, what to change and what to start.

"The parents are really accepting and helpful," Clause said. "It's great to be in a community where the parents are willing to help."